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Just what should be kept secret?

THE GREAT question being asked by many Americans, particularly in Washington, is: "What is a government secret and does it still exist?" The question is given added emphasis by the publication in the New York weekly Village Voice of a significant part of a report on American intelligence which the House of Representatives had voted by a large majority should not be published.

The House's no-publication vote was a slap in the face to its own intelligence committee. Congressman Pike, the bumptious chairman of that committee, wished to publish its report without honouring an undertaking he had given President Ford—that in exchange for getting free access to the information, he would seek presidential approval before publishing his findings.

Another reason is that congressmen had received an unusually heavy volume of mail from constituents against publication.

In legal terms, it does not matter whether the report was published before or after the House of Representatives decided by an overwhelming majority to suppress it. No law was broken, hence no law could be invoked. The espionage act and the law against stealing documents are not applicable.

But the question of what is a secret does not apply only to national security material. Congress, for instance, is now taking a great interest in the operations of banks. The news leaked out in the Press that the First National City Bank and Chase Manhattan Bank of New York had been placed on a list of "problem" banks by the office of the controller of the currency and that Chase Manhattan, in particular, was singled out for poor management. As well as big business, the judges and the police are being put under special scrutiny.

Thus, not only the American government is challenged for having been too secretive and hence not enough under public control, but also many other privileged groups that have been operating comfortably and unchallenged under even greater secrecy and lack of accountability.

A vast majority of Americans now have a feeling of being taken advantage of. This feeling, which used to be limited mainly to blacks and the poor, owes its virulence to the deceptions by the government during the Vietnam war and Watergate. Momentum was added by a much more watchful Press, by the discoveries of bribery by big business and the cheating of the consumer.

There is a powerful compulsion to apply new and different standards everywhere and, of course, the Press cannot exclude itself from this wave of re-examination. Nor can members of Congress, many of whom, it has been discovered, have accepted cash payments over long periods from large corporations.

In my travels about the country, I find that one of the frequent questions is whether the Press is overstepping its social function and assuming too powerful a role in the American political system. People also wonder whether the old usage should not still be observed, by which private indiscretions about public men should be reported only when they affect public work.

Patrick Moynihan, the retiring American ambassador to the United Nations, some four years ago raised the question at great length in a magazine article. He asked whether, if the balance should tip too far in the direction of the Press, "our capacity for effective democratic government will be seriously and dangerously weakened."

Eric Sevareid, a leading commentator, has accused some of the same people who were shocked by what happened to well-intentioned people in the McCarthy days of coming disturbingly close to similar tactics. There is a good deal to that argument. An intolerance exists in Washington, which is a bitter reaction to the intolerance of the Nixon crew. But one would have expected it to have evaporated by now, even though in an election year almost everything is reduced to politics.

However, a few telephone calls to friends around the country made me realise how unaware the rest of the country is of the sensations that excite Washington. Fed up with politicians of both parties, most people seem to be determined to transact what they consider more important business—namely, business. Proof of how little they listen to the politicians and the Press is that City and Chase Manhattan Bank shares have gone up.

The kind of pre-eminence Congress is trying to assert may have been tolerable two or three generations ago, but not today when the United States is the leader in world affairs. This self-assertiveness of Congress looks more and more like a camouflage for some neo-isolationist attitudes and a desire to run Dr Kissinger out of town.

In past periods of international uncertainties both parties made a special effort to keep foreign policy out of an election campaign. But this time both Mr Reagan and some of the Democratic candidates are trying with simplistic arguments to make capital out of attacking such issues as détente and arms control, and the Secretary of State personally.

In these circumstances, it is not easy to pursue the conduct of foreign affairs or to keep one's mind on the job. Dr Kissinger is determined, if possible, to bring off another arms control agreement to cap his career as Secretary of State. His popularity is sliding, but he still has a great deal of fight left in him. He also is a man who hates to see his enemies triumph.

BY HENRY BRANDON